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“Private Security Firms: Standards, Cooperation and Coordination on the Battlefield”

Statement of Rep. Christopher Shays
June 13, 2006

Last week the leader of al Qaeda in Iraq Abu Masab al-Zarqawi was killed in an air strike. His death is significant. This man beheaded people. He had thousands murdered. He blew up both churches and mosques. His goal was to prevent Iraqi democracy. We congratulate the Iraqi people, and especially our military forces and all others who participated in bringing an end to his reign of terror.

Although Zarqawi is eliminated the difficult and necessary mission in Iraq continues. Even with the appointments of the Ministers of Defense and Interior and the increasing role of Iraqi security forces we can expect terrorists and insurgents to continue their efforts to prevent establishment of a democratic government.

Iraq is a complex operational space. Military forces, civilian US government agencies, international organizations, contractors, non-governmental organizations and a diverse local population all share a common geographical area amidst those who would do them great harm. It is difficult to distinguish friend from foe. Included in this complex arena are private security firms.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimates there are over 60 private security firms operating in Iraq, employing approximately 25,000 personnel. Other estimates indicate there may be as many as 180 firms employing close to 50,000 people. These firms provide security for convoys, personnel, both government and civilian, including visiting delegations, bases, housing compounds and reconstruction projects.

The nature of their job puts them in harm's way. The most publicized private security firm casualties in Iraq came when four Blackwater employees were killed in Fallujah and their bodies hung from a bridge, but there are others.

General Peter Pace, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said private security firms "...are doing a great job for what they have been hired to do. But if they choose right now to not report, to not let people know where they're going and they get into trouble, it is very difficult to be able to respond to them."

Today we ask:

What are the evolving roles and missions of private security firms operating in Iraq?

What standards and capabilities are private security firms required to have before being hired by our government?

And, to what extent do private security firms coordinate with the US military and other government agencies operating in Iraq?

The mission in Iraq is far from complete. Only time will tell the impact of al-Zarqawi's death. Iraqi ministers are in place. And Iraqi security forces are becoming more and more effective. As these forces take control private security firms are presented with a new dimension—the coordination with not only Coalition forces but with Iraqi forces as well.

We thank all the witnesses for taking the time to appear before us today, and thank them all for their efforts to bring peace and stability to Iraq.